

Harvard Business
School Bulletin
February 1958

OTV
double space

Approved For Release 2001/11/01 : CIA-RDP78-04724A000200030016-4

A courageous executive we know asked his secretary to give him a memo of her views on how he could be a better manager. She brooded and scurried for a week, and this is what he found on his desk. If the shoe fits.....

A Secretary Talks Back

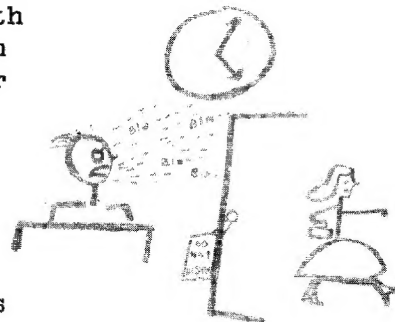
MEMO

TO: Mr. _____

FROM: Miss _____

Frankly, I wasn't quite sure how to go about this job. No one has ever asked me to do anything quite like this before, and I doubt that many secretaries have been handed this particular assignment, though heaven knows they get asked to do almost everything else!

Anyway, I did decide that I wanted to come up with something useful instead of the usual gripe session about starting dictation after 4:30, giving unclear instructions, marking up letters in ink and then sending them out, and that sort of stuff. And saying "good morning," remembering birthdays, and what not. So I talked around the office with some of the other girls a little bit, trying to pick up some generalizations which would apply not just to you and your habits but to a good cross section of businessmen, executives.



Each secretary I spoke to had something different to say, because naturally every office situation is shaped by the personalities involved. Some girls could suggest nothing—maybe they had a high sense of loyalty or were honestly contented, or just had no critical ability. Others were practically impossible to turn off once they had started, and I found that though many of their comments were worth while, it very easily disintegrated into a petty kind of sniping session. Maybe some of this flavor still remains in my findings, but perhaps that is inevitable.

To begin with, a good many men seem to have missed the idea that you had when you asked me to do this job—that they can improve their performance if

they really think through how their secretaries can help them. This is really quite surprising considering that a man's closest office associate is usually his secretary—and she is also the one who can upset him the most easily! So let me say at this point that your conscious attention to my job should be an example for your colleagues to follow.

Beyond that, most of the girls agreed on one thing: It is virtually impossible to do a top-notch job unless you are kept informed of what the boss is doing and just what his duties are. Though this "member of the team" stuff has been worked to death, a knowledge of the problems the boss is tackling helps greatly to stimulate the secretary's interest. If she just sees fragments and corners, it can be highly frustrating and confusing. You remember the famous story about the elephant: Six blind Hindus, according to the story, tried to describe an elephant. Each took hold of a different part of the animal—tusk, ear, trunk, side, leg, tail. Each then described the elephant in a different way—as a spear, fan, snake, wall, tree, rope.

It is to the executive's benefit for his secretary to be aware of the big picture. He can then entrust her with increasing responsibility with the assurance that she knows what it is all about. Furthermore, a girl who instinctively knows what projects are important so they can be dispatched with speed and intelligence can be of real help. Finally, anyone who works as closely as does a secretary likes to feel that she is important enough to know what's in the wind.

In some cases, a secretary has had
Some firms offer a formal training period to prepare the girl for her job. In offices where this is not so, discussions and explanations from boss to secretary are helpful. Background reading is often useful if it is not so overwhelmingly voluminous that it discourages rather than instructs. But each executive should decide how best to train his own secretary—the important point is not how he does it, but that he does it. The time it takes will pay great dividends.

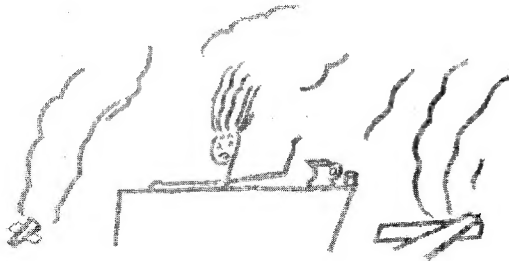
And then there's responsibility. Some executives jealously guard their areas of authority, failing to realize that the more they can satisfactorily delegate to their secretary, the more interest she will take in her job, and the more time and energy he will have to devote to the activities that demand his special talents. He must size up her abilities to do this, but it often does not hurt to give her even a little more than you are certain she can handle. She may surprise you in either direction, but how wonderful if she fills the bill beyond your expectations!

By the way, in suggesting that executives give their secretaries more responsibility, I don't mean tossing some large project at them just because the boss is in a jam and can't handle it himself. I mean a regular, planned arrangement which involves a steady expansion of her responsibility as far as she can go.

Many of the girls I spoke to had very definite feelings about organization and use of time. They wished that the boss would start his day by thinking out as completely as he could exactly what he was going to do. He might then read his mail (if he gets it fairly early in the morning) and arrange it in

order of importance, shaping up the reply to each letter as he looks at it. Then enter the secretaries. Too often an executive calls his girl into his office without the foggiest idea of how he wants to say what he has on his mind. So the organization takes place during dictation, an often slow and repetitious task with much reading back and changes. How much it would help if a man simply sat quietly in his chair for five minutes before starting and mentally sketched out his wording.

This kind of advance planning, incidentally, cuts down the crisis nature of too many offices. No secretary minds helping the boss out of a sudden emergency—and interrupting her schedule of work to do it—but a constant series of fires to be put out is disorganizing, irritating, and unnecessary.

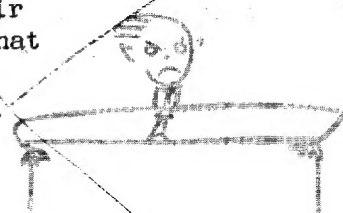


All too many executives have obviously not reached their present posts because of their grasp of the spoken or written word. Some of them seem to have difficulty in expressing themselves, and though a good secretary

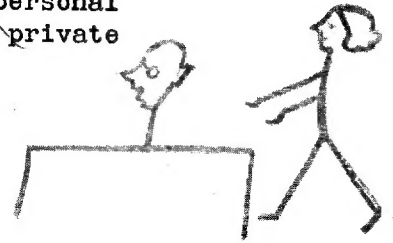
can smooth out the letters (if she is literate herself), the result may be sterile and lack personality. Some men realize this lack of skill on their part and try to deal with it by writing out what they wish to say, and giving it to their secretary to type. But here enters another tragic flaw: many of the men are Illegible! It is dynamic, no doubt, and a sign of having arrived to write carelessly, but pity the poor translator who is certain to be confounded by such a scramble!

Loyalty in the office is another very important matter, and on a two-way line. Any good secretary knows that one of her virtues is an ability to keep her mouth shut whenever she has even the slightest doubt that what she may say might embarrass or otherwise trip up her boss. This assumes that he is scrupulous in his dealings, but she can always bail out if he is not. Most of the girls in our office felt that their bosses were in general standing behind them, but said that some were likely to let their own errors be shouldered by their secretaries. It never stops being important to admit your own mistakes.

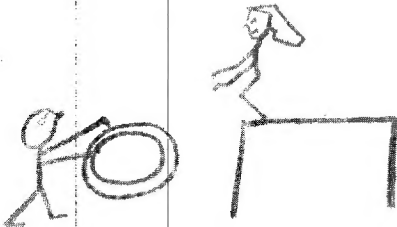
This makes me think of something which seems less important—an annoying little habit. Some executives, scrupulous in their dealings in the business world at large, and considerate of their subordinates in other ways, are light-fingered pilferers when it comes to using their secretary's work supplies. One of the girls said that at the end of every week she regularly goes to her boss' desk and hooks back those things he has taken. It is so bad that she has had to adopt a system of secret markings so she can recognize her things later. He doesn't stop at pencils and paper pads, but even has turned up with her cigarettes and personal desk calendar! He doesn't mean to, but he usually dictates standing in front of her desk (which she doesn't like either because he paces and she can't catch what he is saying when his back is turned), and absent-mindedly picks up pencils or something to fiddle with. Then eventually he bears them back to his desk with the bland assurance of ownership.



Also, any secretary will say that she dislikes having her boss search through her desk or files when she is not there. The order may be obscure, but not to her, and she does not want it to become even more confused in her absence. Most people, bosses too, regard their desks as personal territory, and no more to be tampered with than someone's private correspondence at home. An executive would do well to remember that his position does not automatically put everything in the office under his direct control. No matter how pure his intentions, it gives him an air of sneakiness to be found pawing furtively through his secretary's desk.



This sort of business may seem petty or insignificant. Actually, I think it is quite important because it reflects the manager's attitude toward his secretary and her job. For some reason, an executive who may be extremely aware of the dignity of other people in an enterprise, and the independent significance of their jobs, may look on his secretary as a sort of chattel. I don't mean that he isn't perfectly pleasant and kind to her—it's just that he seems to see her as a very close personal assistant whose job has no integrity of its own but is exclusively what he wants to make it. She becomes, then, just a mirror of his wants and needs instead of a person in her own right, filling a specific kind of responsibility in the company. Maybe this is why the popular cartoons and jokes always show the relationship as one involving some property rights for the boss! Incidentally, I suspect many executives look on their "assistant-to" in the same way.



Leaving aside the human relations angle, any boss who considers his secretary in such a light is wasting a great resource. She can make a far greater contribution both to the organization as a whole and to the executive in particular if her job is clearly defined and important in its own right, rather than just a backslapping operation for the old man.

Thus, I would hope that the executives in our office—you included—would make a real effort to evolve their secretaries' jobs in the direction of "administrative assistants" or "executive secretaries." Not only would that make our lives pleasanter and more rewarding; it would step up the efficiency and productivity of everyone in the office.

